



COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS

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DIRECTOR

May 23, 2002

The Honorable Board of Supervisors
County of Los Angeles
383 Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration
500 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012-3265

Dear Supervisors:

FY 2002-03 UNMET NEEDS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS

The FY 2002-03 Official Budget Request of the Department of Consumer Affairs included \$2,547,000 of unmet needs.

Of this amount, the Department has identified \$683,000 and 7.0 positions as our highest priorities for consideration by your Board during FY 2002-03 budget deliberations. These items aligns with the County Strategic plan goal of Service Excellence.

The Department requests your consideration of the following priorities:

- 1. Highest Priority:** **Increase the Funding of the Small Claims Court Advisor Program of the Department of Consumer Affairs**
- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|
| Amount: | \$402,000 |
| Positions: | 5.0 |
| Funding Source: | Small Claims Advisor Program Fund |

This request will allow the Department of Consumer Affairs to be more responsive to the ever-increasing needs of the residents of the Los Angeles County for information and counseling on all aspects of the Small Claims court processes.

As you may know, the revenue in the fund is being generated from Small Claims filing fees that were paid by litigants in approximately 24 Courts in Los Angeles County. Therefore, this request will not require additional County General Fund dollars. It will, however, require the reallocation of a portion of the projected Small Claims Advisor Fund revenues that is currently recommended by the CAO for Court-related programs. The department

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was informed by CAO staff that the Court-related programs include, but are not limited to, the following: 1) criminal indigent defense - if no Public Defender is available 2) facilities maintenance for courthouses 3) expert witnesses and 4) lab tests.

Currently, the Small Claims Court Advisor Program of the Department of Consumer Affairs operates in the Civic Center and in six branch locations (1 day per week in 4 locations and ½ day in two locations). In each Supervisorial District, there is only one (1) service day per week. In FY 2000-01, the program counseled over 140,000 litigants or potential litigants in person and by telephone.

Your consideration of this request, will increase the number of service days from one (1) to four (4) days per week in each Supervisorial District. These can be achieved by either increasing the number of service days in the existing branch location or identifying new court venues.

With more branch service days/locations and counseling staff, the County will be able to provide constituents with: easier access to a County service that is closer to their homes and place of business; updated website and telephone recorded information; quicker response to online inquiries via the internet; and more personal assistance in completing the required Small Claims Court documents and answering pertinent questions regarding the Small Claims Court process.

Furthermore, more branch service days/locations and counseling staff will also reduce the possibility of constituents missing important court filing deadlines which could jeopardize their case. It will also reduce the wait time and frustration of constituents who are on the telephone or at the walk-in counter.

2. Second Priority:	Provide Funding for a Public Information Officer
Amount:	\$ 90,000
Positions:	1.0
Funding Source:	Ongoing Net County Cost

In the Department's effort to be responsive to the needs of its service population, it currently, within its limited budget and resources, performs the following tasks/services: (1) responds to media inquiries - both major network and ethnic; (2) responds to community request to participate at speaking engagements and community outreach events; (3) develops consumer educational materials and press releases for distribution; (4) responds to e-mail inquiries; (5) maintains a department website; (6) updates the 24-hour recorded consumer counseling information for various divisions; and (7) per Board-order, reviews the effectiveness of the department's toll-free number. These tasks are within the scope of the duties of a Public Information Officer.

Currently, the Director of the department responds to these requests and services. In many instances, the Director needs to assign the task of responding to these requests to a staff member which has a negative impact on their primary job duties and responsibilities.

In fiscal year 2000-01, the department responded to over 140 media contacts and approximately 100 speaking engagements and community outreach efforts. This year, the department responded to media requests on current consumer-related topics such as Identity Theft, Pyramid Schemes, Energy Crisis, School Scholarship Scams, etc. The department also made arrangements for special events during National Consumer Week and organize senior community forums.

3. Third Priority: Provide Funding for Special Investigation Staff
Amount: \$191,000
Positions: 2.0
Funding Source: Ongoing Net County Cost

This request will enable the Department of Consumer Affairs to conduct additional special investigation that lead to the prosecution of those who commit consumer-related civil and criminal offenses against the residents of Los Angeles County. This position will aid in the recovery of restitution to victims and investigative costs to the Department.

Currently, the Department, as the clearinghouse for consumer fraud, is able to identify potential frauds and deceptive practices that victimize the residents of Los Angeles County, but lacks the resources to fully investigate all cases appropriate for prosecution.

In FY 2000-01, with its limited staff and resources, the Department of Consumer Affairs working as the lead investigative agency, collaborated with the Attorney-General's office and the office of the District Attorney - Consumer Protection Division - to prosecute two of the largest Toyota car dealers in Southern California. These efforts resulted in restitution of about \$1.5 million to hundreds of consumers in Southern California and reimbursement of \$20,000 for investigative costs.

The Department, also working as the lead investigative agency, partnered with the Los Angeles City Attorney's Office on the prosecution of a couple who was operating a wedding video business but were not delivering the edited and completed video tapes to the couples. About 800 video tapes and baby pictures were confiscated from their place of business. These efforts resulted in returning the priceless items to the victims and the criminal prosecution of the business owners.

